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THE FIELDS WHITE UNTO THE HARVEST;

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL,

ON BEHALF OF

THE HAMPSHIRE SOCIETY

FOR THE

Education of the Poor

ON THE PLAN OF THE REV. DR. BELL, AND IN THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH,

ON TUESDAY, JULY 4, 1837,

BY

THE REV. GEORGE MOBERLY, D.C.L.

LATE FELLOW AND TUTOR OF BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD:
HEAD MASTER OF WINCHESTER COLLEGE.

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ST. JOHN, IV. 35, 36.

SAY NOT YE, THERE ARE YET FOUR MONTHS, AND THEN COMETH HARVEST? BEHOLD I SAY UNTO YOU, LIFT UP YOUR EYES AND LOOK ON THE FIELDS, FOR THEY ARE WHITE ALREADY UNTO HARVEST.

AND HE THAT REAPETH RECEIVETH WAGES, AND GATHERETH FRUIT UNTO LIFE ETERNAL: THAT BOTH HE THAT SOWETH AND HE THAT REAPETH MAY REJOICE TOGETHER.

OUR blessed Lord uttered these remarkable words after his conversation with the woman of Samaria at the well of Sychar. When she had left Him, in order to bring some of the inhabitants of the city to see and speak with Him, His disciples came in the meanwhile, and besought Him to eat. To this request He replied, that He had meat to eat which they knew not of, namely, to do the will of Him by whom He was sent, and to finish His work; meaning thereby that, in speaking with the woman of Samaria, and instructing her candid though sinful and guilty mind respecting the approaching salvation, He was doing what was more necessary and delightful to Him than meat and drink. He then continues, in the words of the text, "Say not ye, there are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? Behold I say unto you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, for they are white

already to harvest;" that is, "As when ye look upon the fields, ye can tell, by the state of the crops, how far it is from harvest, and forecast, in some degree, the promise of the year; so can I foresee the prospect of a rich spiritual harvest in this hitherto despised and guilty country of Samaria. Already, as it were, the colour of the grain is changing as the harvest draws near. This poor guilty woman, who, attracted by my words, is gone to call her friends—her friends who will soon say to her that now they believe, not because of her saying, but because they themselves have heard, and know that I am the Saviour of the world, are already as corn white unto the harvest—they know that Messias cometh, and are looking for him—they speak the truth, and do not conceal the sinfulness of their past or present life—they anxiously desire the living waters of salvation.

"Yet shall I not reap that harvest Myself. In the '*four months before the corn ripens*' I must lay down my life at Jerusalem, and take it again, and ascend into Heaven, and send the Comforter. Then I will send you, my disciples, to reap that whereon ye have bestowed no labour: others have laboured, and ye shall enter into their labours. And ye that reap that spiritual harvest shall receive wages. Your gathering of the fruits shall contribute to ensure both your own life eternal, and that of those for whom ye labour; in order that, in the consummation of bliss hereafter, I, the sower of the good seed, and ye, the reapers, may rejoice together over sinners who have repented, believed, and been forgiven."

Accordingly, after the four months of ripening were past, and Emmanuel, or God with us, had ascended where He was before, and received and given gifts to men, whereby the Lord God dwelt among them in the Holy Spirit, the spiritual harvest of Samaria was not long in the gathering, No sooner had the first dispersion of the disciples taken place, after the death of Stephen, than we read that "then Philip (the Deacon) went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them; and the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them; and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city." So blessed and entire was the conversion, that it was truly said that "*Samaria* had received the word of God." The good seed had fallen upon good ground, and received in honest and good hearts, had brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

Those workmen have long since been called to their reward. The wheat which they reaped has long since been gathered into the garners of Heaven. But not the less since that time has the blessed Spirit, who abideth with the Church for ever, sown good seed in God's field, seen successive generations grow white towards their spiritual ripeness, sent labourers, successors of the apostles, to reap that which God by His grace sowed. And not only do the generations, as they pass, continue to exhibit a likeness

of what took place in God's early dealings with Samaria, but the world itself, as it grows older, may present to such as have eyes to see, the whiteness of a coming harvest.

To us, indeed, fallen as we are upon times full of various and ominous importance, this topic cannot fail to be a source of great and even painful interest. In no previous generation have exertions, such as we now witness, been made to train up the young in the ways of religion and morality, to bring our brethren of all ranks into orderly and Christian habits, to evangelize Heathen nations. Whatever of irregularity or waste of power there may be in our efforts, at least there is no lack of exertion, and by consequence our fields are looking white, our generation is, we hope, advancing to something like a spiritual ripeness; at least, it does not seem too bold to say, that many an individual life is doing more honour to the Christian profession—many an individual heart is becoming more and more disciplined under the power of the Holy Spirit of God—many more lips abstain from foolish or unholy talk, and labour for the edifying of the brethren, in consequence of such exertions. And so again we cannot doubt that not our generation only, but the world itself, is daily drawing near to its harvest. Though the times and seasons are utterly beyond our knowledge, yet year by year warnings are given to nations, and either listened to or neglected; wars and rumours of wars, distresses of nations with perplexity, turn the minds of thoughtful men to reflect on the coming of the end. The purposes of God, darkly shadowed in

the later prophesies, seem from the political circumstances of the world, especially in the eastern nations, to be tending towards their accomplishment.

But on this portion of the subject it is not my present purpose to enlarge. Perhaps, indeed, there may be a reasonable doubt whether the obscure and awful subject of unfulfilled prophecy is not primarily intended to keep up in the minds of Christian men a certain wakefulness of feeling—a waiting to see what God will do; that as, in older times, the particular benefit of prophecy was to be found after the fulfilment, in the proof furnished of God's omniscience, and of the doctrines and precepts which the prophecy was given to guarantee; so in these times, and in respect of prophecies relating to the final close of things, the express and intended advantage is to be found in the times precedent to the fulfilment—not in speculating how the prophecies are to be fulfilled, or when, but in keeping our hearts alive to a sense of God's power at work in the events of the world—God's providence awake to direct the issues of human thoughts and counsels—God's goodness pledged to bring to a happy end for His servants the troubled and much perplexed series of human weaknesses and sins—God's judgment waiting to pronounce upon the impenitent the sentence of long-delayed destruction—God's knowledge, which in distant ages, and before ever the earth and the world were made, knew, without evidence, the yet undeveloped train of things from the beginning to the end.

It is, however, to the other part of the subject that

the occasion on which we are now assembled must at present confine our attention. We live in a generation of much light and knowledge. For good or for evil a mighty increase of activity in spreading information of all kinds among men has grown up all round us. Societies of vast size and means have taken the place of individuals, and with greatly multiplied powers work to educate, to preach, to convert, to further, in their different modes and spheres, the advancement of mankind. And, undoubtedly, this new state of things produces, in some respects, a new state of duties. Undoubtedly there are various cautions which should be given both to those who support such charitable institutions, and those who receive benefit from them, which in former times were not needed.

For instance, in a simpler state of society, efforts of charity, whether in relieving distress or imparting knowledge, are scattered and personal. They have the disadvantage of being scattered, and thereby they do by no means work the full amount of objective good which they might do; but then, on the other hand, they have the great advantage of being personal, and therein they do *subjectively*, to the agent, far more good than can be done by any more systematic and collective charity. Gifts thus given are directly connected with their motives; they issue immediately from the desire of doing good, awakened by the visible object of need; they are acts of progress in our habits of charity; they are the daily acknowledgments to God of our stewardship. In all these respects they are so valuable to ourselves that

it must ever be at least doubtful whether any increase of objective, external benefit can compensate for the total loss of them. They keep us in more or less of contact with distress and ignorance, instead of inducing us to leave the administration of relief in other hands, and consoling ourselves with the recollection that we have supplied a portion of the funds.

Let it not be imagined for a moment that in these observations I am intending to depreciate or discourage the efforts made by Societies—very, very far from it. I mention these particulars, and many such particulars might be mentioned, in order to shew that the new state of things in our country requires that we should be on our guard against new dangers. I mention them in order to be able to urge upon you, the supporters of our Schools and other Public Charities, that as you have bestowed your money in a way very useful and valuable to others, so by giving your time and attention to the administration of these charities, by being the more anxious not to blunt or deaden the charitable feelings of your minds, by searching out cases of need for yourselves, by instructing your servants, by taking care that all who are within your influence are encouraged and assisted to know and do God's will, you do that personal good to yourselves, which is the *first half* of charity. In this sense most truly does charity *begin at home.* The man who subscribes to the support of schools for the poor, and meanwhile allows his children or servants to be idle or ignorant, or is careless of their evil habits, is, I fear, making a very great mistake on the

very subject of charity and education. Therefore let this be my first caution;—namely, that as we meet to support these most useful and excellent schools, and unite our slight and distant efforts for the production of this great and visible good, so we each of us watch our own hearts in respect of this very point of charitable education, and take the more pains, by *personal effort*, to spread knowledge, and encourage habits of industry, and advance the religious progress of those who are more immediately entrusted to us.

Then, again, the vast scale on which our noble charities are conducted necessitates another caution. We are apt to look at the large amount of yearly income of such societies, to count the number of scholars, for instance, who in Heathen countries with a view to their conversion, in our own country with a view to their religious and intellectual improvement, are receiving instruction in our schools—and comforting ourselves with these truly gratifying reflections, we are apt to forget that a vast moral machine, such as we have helped to put in motion, is subject to other laws than those by which effects are produced in the mere material and mechanical departments. To influence minds is a difficult and delicate task. If God's blessing be needed on our crops, on every process of the material and inanimate world, how much more when we essay to convert sinners, to train habits, to impart intellectual power, to direct moral growth, to strengthen religious principle? And what is to engage the Holy Spirit of God to bless our designs, to give life and energy to our lessons, to give fertility

to the soil on which our seed falls, to produce any, the slightest, good result from our efforts? Is it not that we, the givers, doing our own Christian duty in our own sphere, striving by the use of all means of grace to improve in Christian habits ourselves, do pray, and that fervently and continually, for His blessing on our charitable works? Are we not apt to give our money at the beginning of the year, and then leave it to work out its own effects? And is it not necessary to remember (particularly when we are expressly disjoining our gifts from our feelings, and entrusting the administration of them wholly to other hands) that our own Christian character and prayers are much required before we can hope for the good effects which we desire? We often hear of the great good done by our large societies, of the numbers of scholars taught by one, or converts made by another of our great charitable institutions. Is it not more striking still that they do so little? Is it not matter of humbling and practical thought to ourselves that though we have been for many years giving our money to educate the people, yet that the generation is still wilful, disobedient, sinful? What impedes the natural benefits of education? Why do not our schools produce more visible, more unquestionable good? Oh! if we could come to feel that we, singly, are the responsible elements of these vast and powerful associations! that our prayers, that our zealous and unobtrusive holiness, that our quiet discharge of duty there where God hath placed us, may thus evangelize foreign nations, work a moral and religious re-

formation at home, fit our poor brethren to do their duty in this life, and to be prepared to enter the life to come! Are we not liable to lose our sense of responsibility in the mass of those who share it with us? Is there not danger that while we increase our apparent power, we thus diminish our real influence?

Am I then undervaluing such joint efforts, my brethren? Nay, I am exalting them. I am shewing you how they may produce an indefinite extent of good. If we give, as Christians, because we feel Christian responsibility, and desire to confer Christian benefit on others; if we jealously keep alive in our hearts a personal sense of our interest in these our gifts, and continually endeavour to recommend them to God's blessing by our prayers, by the silent offering of daily, humble holiness, who can limit, even in thought, the extent to which God may be pleased to bless them?

The schools, on behalf of which I am desired to address you to-day, are of such evident utility and value that it is difficult to conceive how any member of the Church of England can fail to give them his support and good wishes, who is made acquainted with their nature. Within the few years that have elapsed since the incorporation of the National Society in London, the education of the poor has been by its means accelerated in a most remarkable manner. It appears that since the year 1818 the number of children in the Society's schools has increased from 117,000 to upwards of 516,000. When to this most gratifying fact we add the consideration of those

points which more expressly characterise all these united societies, namely, the training schools in which teachers are instructed in an uniform and systematic manner, and the Central Schools in different districts to serve as models to all the surrounding neighbourhood, we must feel assured that the benefits derived to the cause of Christian Education, from the establishment and success of the National Society and its branches, are very much under rated, when they are calculated by the mere increase in the number of scholars in the schools actually in union. Sounder principles of instruction are diffused, by which all the neighbourhood profits. Those who are taught to teach with effect extend the knowledge which they have received in their own districts. As far as judicious arrangement and prudent administration can secure the success of our institution, our society appears to have the best reason to look for a prosperous issue to its labours; and it is a striking testimony to the soundness of judgment which directs the management of these schools, that the principles laid down by the National Society have been adopted as those upon which all grants of public money should be distributed in furtherance of education.

When we further reflect that this widely-spread, and yet more widely-spreading system of well administered education is founded upon Christian truth and doctrine as taught in the Church of England—that in giving our money, our time, our wishes, and our prayers, for its success, we are labouring in strict and holy subordination to those to whom in the first

place the care of souls belongeth, as those that must give account—that the venerable formularies of our Holy Church (which have been for 300 years the channel of communicating vital truth to millions who, after glorifying God in their lives, are now, we may hope, glorified in their deaths)—that these formularies are used by this society to teach so many hundred thousand children the doctrines and duties of true religion—when we consider this, we may indeed take comfort, and think that in supporting such a holy design we are labouring in our Master's field, giving, under His grace, no slight furtherance to the spiritual ripeness of our generation.

The subject of education generally is one of fearful importance and interest. The communication of knowledge to a whole community must needs, in any case, produce danger; and if it be not rightly, that is religiously, directed, and accompanied with high Christian principle, it must necessarily end in mischief. What a comfort then is it to those who look, not without fear, at the rapidity with which knowledge, often unguided, perhaps sometimes misguided, increases on all sides of us, to know that, besides the hundreds of children in our own Central School in Winchester, there were last year upwards of 9000 children in the schools of Hampshire, subject to the discipline and instruction recommended by the National Society! Here they are taught to reverence what is holy, to regard themselves as members, dutiful and attached members, of our Apostolical Church. Here they may, if our designs are blest with success,

grow up to diffuse around them the same principles which they are now happily imbibing themselves.

Can we then suffer such noble institutions to languish for lack of support? Can we hear without emotion that the annual income of our local Society, which, in its earlier years amounted to about £400, now usually falls below £250?—that its present annual means do not entirely support even the present annual expenditure? And this when, instead of having tried the energies of such a scheme to the utmost, we have only proved that they are capable of unlimited increase—that nothing but lack of scholars to be taught can bound their power of producing the greatest extent of the most valuable kind of good to the community?

I am persuaded that things like these only need to be fairly presented to the minds of Christians in order to produce in them the warmest zeal to further so excellent a work as that of which I speak. Do they value their own baptismal privileges and hopes? Do they value the blessing of God, which, by putting them into a situation where they have enjoyed good and religious education, has given them the best opportunity of working out those hopes, maintaining those privileges, knowing how to please God, and desiring to please Him in their respective stations? How then can they neglect, by so small personal sacrifice, to bring these same blessings within the reach of so many of their poor, baptised brethren—their ignorant, yet Christian neighbours?

Would they not further the moral well being of

their countrymen—would they not impart to them the comfort and happiness of well ordered lives, of habits of industry and content? They know how absolutely powerless we are, singly, to produce such effects upon others; how impossible it is, when age has confirmed habits of idleness and vice, to bring persons back to submit to such necessary but irksome discipline. No amount of profuse generosity on the part of single givers, no paroxysmal efforts, if I may so express myself, to do good, are likely to produce wide or lasting moral change. In these respects, in which single givers and single lives are almost wholly devoid of power, the National Society, by its command of continual means, and its unbroken duration, may do exceeding good. It educates habits. It can afford to lose time. It does not anticipate effects. It casts its bread upon the waters, and can wait many days to find it.

Do we know, again, that we are God's stewards to administer what is only trusted to our guardianship? Servants, left to trade for a few years with talents, of which our Lord will shortly demand a strict account? Where can we lay out that which is lent to us for awhile with more profit than in furthering the religious instruction of the poor? Are they not left on the earth to be Christ's successors in receiving the acknowledgment of our subjection to Himself? He did not remain long on earth; the poor we have with us always. In their advancement in religious knowledge and practice will He not on His return receive His own with usury?

Oh! my Brethren, it is enough to make our hearts burn within us to feel that we, even we, may by God's grace be made the channels of communicating such unspeakable blessings to each other: that, conscious as we are of our own weakness and manifold sin, in no spirit of self-righteousness, nor esteeming ourselves better than they, we may be allowed to go and call our own brethren, and bring them to the Messiah whom we have found!

And while we are thus overpowered with wonder and gratitude to think that we are permitted to be the channels of blessing, can we forget that we are no more than the channels—that the source and fountain of blessing is our gracious Father and God, the Father of Lights from whom *every* good and perfect gift cometh? Can we stop short, and hope that we are doing good, unless we do by all means in our power pray the Holy Spirit to sanctify our labours? Can we be so blind or forgetful as to think that the Spiritual Harvest in which we are not unwilling labourers, is of our own sowing?

Surely not—we shall feel that while the utmost that we can do must be done to further such works as these—for our sakes, for our brethrens sakes, for our country's sake, for Christ's sake—yet in all this we work beneath the will and power of God. He in His Spirit sows the good seed: He turns the hearts to be honest and good, and receive it tractably and humbly: He gives the increase: His is the power, the blessing, the fertility, the fruit, the praise.

Our fields are indeed growing white to the harvest.

In a few more years, we who meet to support these schools, and they who are instructed in them, shall have attained to our ripeness, and either be gathered into the garners of Heaven, or (which God forbid) be bound in bundles for the burning. Then we shall feel and know (if we be of the happy number who have gone with willing hearts to labour in our Master's field) that he that reapeth shall receive wages, and gather fruit unto eternal life; and both our gracious Lord who hath sowed, and we, the humble yet zealous reapers, shall rejoice together.